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Editors' Introduction: Disciplinary Stakes For Cultural Studies Today

Stefanie A Jones, Eero Laine and Chris Alen Sula

ABSTRACT Editors' introduction to Issue 5.1. Includes an overview of articles in this issue, editorial announcements, and call for book review editor.

[Cultural studies] does have some stake in the choices it makes. It does matter whether cultural studies is this or that. It can't be just any old thing which chooses to march under a particular banner. It is a serious enterprise, or project, and that is inscribed in what is sometimes called the 'political' aspect of cultural studies. Not that there's one politics already inscribed in it. But there is something at stake in cultural studies, in a way that I think, and hope, is not exactly true of many other very important intellectual and critical practices. Here one registers the tension between a refusal to close the field, to police it and, at the same time, a determination to stake out some positions within it and argue for them.

—Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies."¹

In many ways this issue of *Lateral* emphasizes the stakes and the relevance of cultural studies to our political moment. This moment is one defined by the expansion of the hierarchizing violences of neoliberal globalization and their impossibilities: refugees fleeing war to encounter nationalist violence; the 99% caught between austerity and the financialization of everyday life; workers trapped between unemployment and homelessness and unlivable labor conditions; the brutality and impunity of local police forces, particularly the state-sanctioned murders of black trans* people, women, and men in the United States, which is disseminated around the world through global military interventions; and those marginalized by their gender and sexual identities, trapped between outright exclusion and the unsatisfactory, anti-revolutionary project of liberal inclusion and incorporation. This issue of *Lateral* draws on a wide range of disciplinary and methodological practices that speak to shared concerns, goals, and, indeed, politics—to the places where cultural studies must take a stance.

This issue of *Lateral* taps into cultural studies' disciplinary and methodological potential at a time when such pointed interventions are more necessary than ever. Far from being "any old thing" that Hall warns us of, cultural studies is and must be imagined into the future as deliberately politicized work against the strengthening of disciplinary boundaries and other institutional barriers that function, in the academy, to limit the surviving and thriving of students and faculty already in oppressed positions. As the authors in this issue do, cultural studies must work against the writing of blackness out of the Left, must confront and counter the profits extracted from digital labor, and stand against the academy's rightward turn—and must continue to do so in an environment of

censure and limitation imposed by both liberal and conservative forces under the ultimatums and the pepper spray of the austerity agenda. Institutional and theoretical attention to the old and new legacies of cultural studies can draw only one conclusion: to move towards justice, to grow the radical academy.

An inter- and transdisciplinary cultural studies is not a project of generic “boundlessness,” or an unlimited “anti-disciplinarity” removed from its historical material conditions. Rather, cultural studies must target those disciplinary boundaries that serve to police particular, material power hierarchies, disciplinaries integral to the reproduction of capitalism as well as the “production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”² Without attention to the immediate materiality by which our disciplines serve capital and distribute power according to, and thus produce, hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, and ability, we risk repeating other intellectual interventions that have become complicit with dematerializing the consequences of racial capitalism.³ Some anti-disciplinary interventions are themselves politically-motivated academic projects oriented towards defending the academy from the very changes demanded by anti-imperialist post-colonialism, by women of color feminisms, and by materialist anti-racisms. Cultural studies must account for these structures lest it do the same.

To these ends, this issue features the first of a two-part forum, “[Emergent Critical Analytics for Alternative Humanities](#),” edited by Chris A. Eng and Amy K. King. Here, the editors and their respondents identify and collectively contemplate four analytics entangled with such hierarchies in the humanities. These analytics structure thought across disciplines, yet resonate strongly with the specific ways that cultural studies has shifted, developed, and refined its focus and ideas in the first part of the twenty-first century: [J. Kēhaulani Kauanui takes up settler colonialism](#); [Kyla Wazana Tompkins, New Materialism](#); [Julie Avril Minich, disability](#); and [Jodi Melamed, institutionality](#). Together, these interventions challenge oppressive political orders in and beyond the academy into the organization of life itself. More than just deconstructing extant ideopistemological restrictions, this forum constructively challenges the humanities, going forward, to begin from these points of departure. In this vein, *Lateral* is excited to invite responses to Part I of this forum, especially from students, junior faculty, and other emerging scholars. These responses will form the foundation for Part II of the forum, to be published in *Lateral* 6. The CFP is available at <http://csalateral.org/wp/issue/5-1/alt-humanities/cfp>.

In addition to the forum, the current issue of *Lateral* includes articles that intervene in a range of academic areas, from histories of the Left to Arabic hip-hop, from queer mentoring to new conceptions of Marx for the digital era. Through these particular entry points, these essays mark a number of parallels between and intersections within and across contemporary thought that remains rooted in the project of cultural studies.

[Anne Donlon](#) delves into the history of the British Left after World War I to assert the significance of the Black and feminist interventions of Claude McKay and Sylvia Pankhurst. Donlon centers the publication of “A Black Man Replies,” McKay’s letter to the editor published in Pankhurst’s newspaper *The Worker’s Dreadnought*, against white supremacist logics mobilized by prominent 1920s leftists that contributed to the reestablishment of policing of and violence against black men. Donlon’s archival discoveries weave together biography, material cultural analysis, and histories of trans-Atlantic activism, and, in the process, reveal the labor of building radical intersectional solidarity that came before and followed the moment of “A Black Man Replies.”

[Rayya El Zein](#) takes up a global analysis of how ideas of blackness, whiteness, and Arabness circulate in post-9/11 media accounts and argues that these concepts work to

mediate Western understandings of politics in the Arab world. El Zein unpacks the paradox by which blackwashing is differentially deployed to mark certain Arab subjects as a “good rapper” or a “bad rapper,” and how both of these valences serve to expand neoliberal orientalism through the political familiarity promised by blackness. As an alternative, El Zein suggests attention to the material, historical, and geographic specificities of the power struggles that structure racial capitalism, classism, and racism, especially essential because of their potential international unrecognizability.

[Jonathan Beller](#) expands conversations about the role of the digital and the digital humanities through attention to the mechanisms by which the digital image is instrumental in neoliberal capitalist accumulation and colonialism. Beller argues that the digital image itself exploits the attentive labor of those who see it, organizes profitable patterns of spectatorship, and links communication directly to financial speculation. Through scrutiny of examples that attempt to disrupt the profitable, algorithmically-capitalized flow of data and attention through the interface of the screen, Beller’s article makes a pointed critique of the ways that fascism manifests in and might be combated via digital economies.

[Edward Chamberlain](#) takes on the pressing need for mentorship for queer youth, in particular queer youth of color. Addressing a dearth in both studies on and commitment to the wellness and flourishing of queer youth of color in institutions of higher learning, Chamberlain turns to what is in some respects both a traditional and nontraditional archive of resources: personal narrative writing by queer people of color. Taking up both Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* and Roland Sintos Coloma’s “Fragmented Entries, Multiple Selves,” Chamberlain argues that the structural hybridity of these narratives serves as a formal model for a queer mentoring methodology, and delves into the texts themselves for examples of how to mentor queer youth of color in and beyond the academy. Chamberlain’s intervention is at the same time vitally theoretical and practical; such sources may be nontraditional to institutions of higher learning, but are often circulated informally for the precise purposes Chamberlain describes.

Finally, this issue finds *Lateral* on the cusp of a number of new initiatives. Due to expanding content and demand, this is the first issue of a new biannual publishing schedule. Readers can expect at least a Spring and a Fall issue forthwith. Be on the lookout for our upcoming special issue “Leveraging Justice,” edited by Janelle Reinelt and María Estrada-Fuentes later this year. More information on this issue is available at <http://csalateral.org/wp/upcoming/leveraging-justice>. The editors [continue to welcome proposals](#) for future special issues.

As part of this moment of growth, in reflection of both reader interest and the desire to mark the excellent scholarship unfolding across the field of cultural studies, *Lateral* is also adding a book review section. We are currently searching for a book review editor who will, in collaboration with the editors, play a significant role in shaping future directions in the field through their curation and editing of reviews of relevant books. Please see the call for book review editor at <http://csalateral.org/wp/contribute/book-review-editor>.

Notes

1. Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies,” in Cultural Studies eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 278, emphasis in original. [↗](#)
2. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 28. [↗](#)

3. See, for instance, recent critiques of anti-materialist turns in post-colonial studies. Amongst other failures of this turn, Neil Lazarus lists, “hostility towards totality and systematic analysis; aversion to dialectics; critique of realism and adoption instead of epistemological conventionalism or constructivism; anti-foundationalism; anti-humanism; refusal of struggle-based models of politics in favour of models that privilege ‘difference’, ‘ambivalence’, ‘complexity’, and ‘complicity’; {and a} repudiation of Marxism, usually taking the form not of a cold war anti-Marxism but of an avant-gardist ‘post-Marxism.’” Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 186. Similarly, recent interdisciplinary work critiques the turn to the posthuman, the post-structural, and the post-disciplinary as a move away from understanding the racializing structures of liberal humanism and the humanities under modernity. See, Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014). Weheliye locates this very critique within Black Studies, describing it on page three as a “(non)disciplinary formation.” It is exactly this kind of pointed intervention in disciplinarity that should serve as a model for cultural studies, as opposed to one meant to obscure and defend disciplinary complicity in racial capitalism. On the racializing formations intrinsic to liberal humanism, as well as a model of engaged interdisciplinarity, see Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015). [↗](#)

[Bio](#)



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SAJ is a McNair scholar, an organizer, and an educator, and received their doctorate from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. SAJ has published in edited collections and *Theatre Journal* and has taught at Brooklyn College, Hunter College, the College of Staten Island, Marymount Manhattan College, and New York University. SAJ’s research explores war, white supremacy, twenty-first century capitalist economies, and the connections between class formation and political practice.

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